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A HISTORY OF FORT CASWELL

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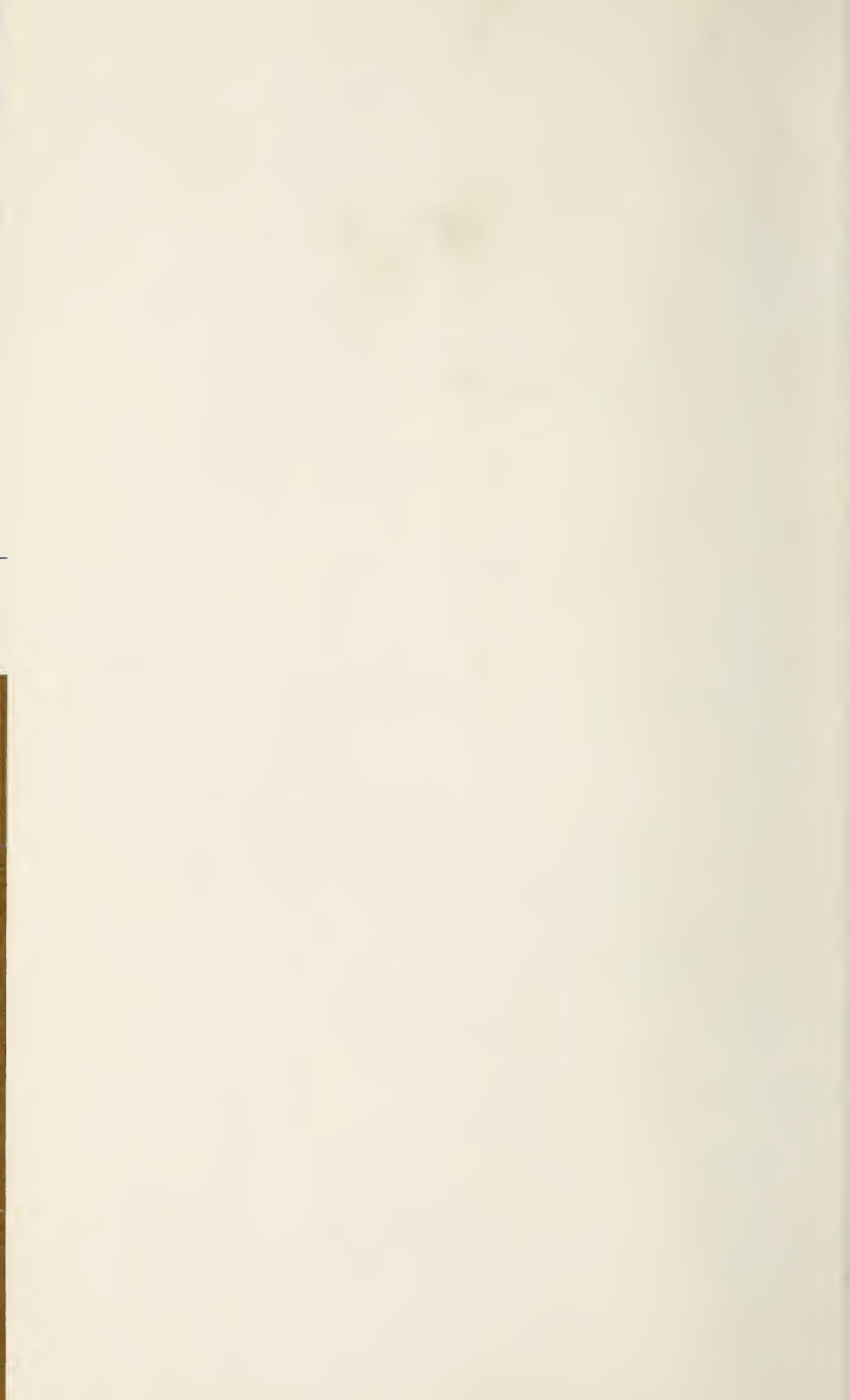
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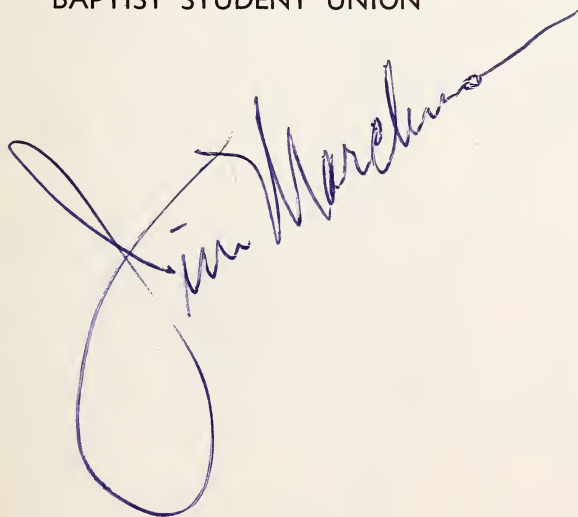
A HISTORY OF FORT CASWELL

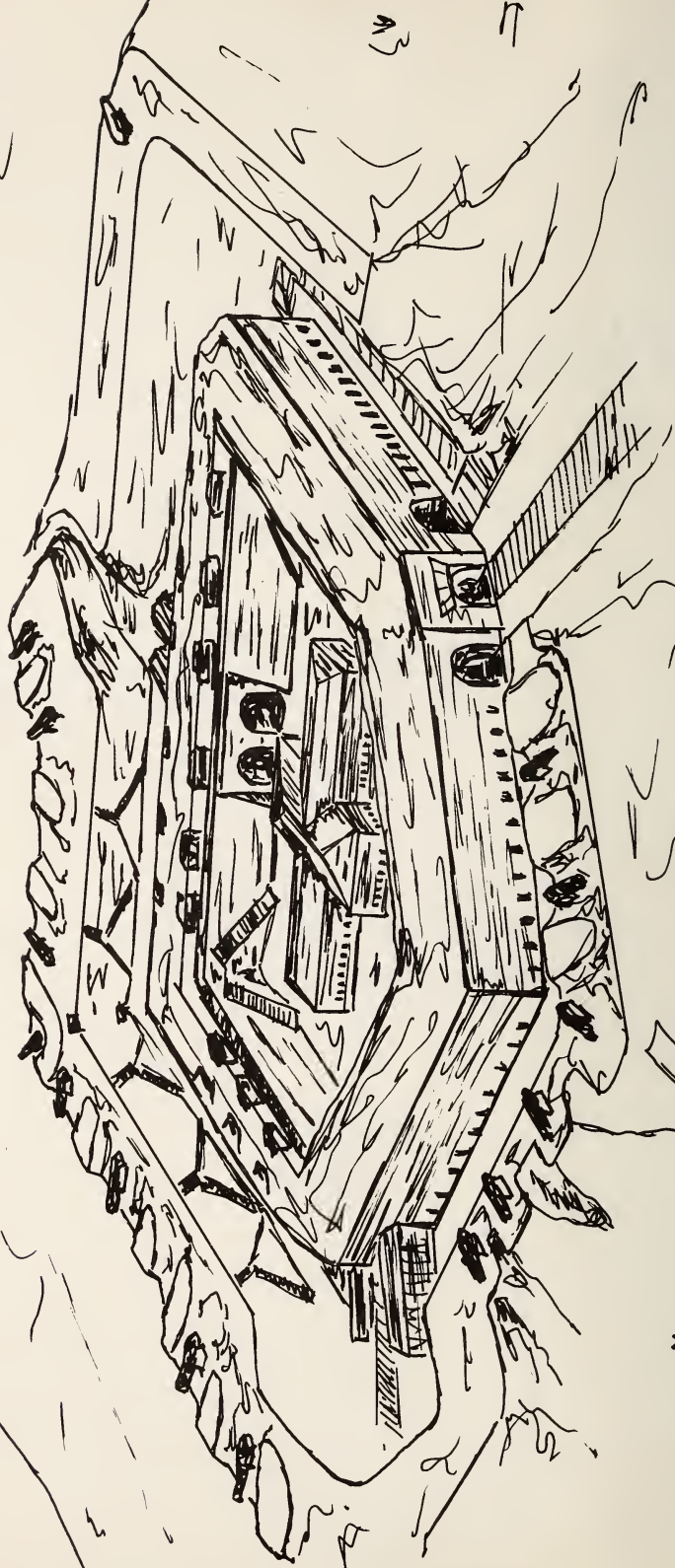
NORTH CAROLINA
BY J. F. MARCHMAN



A History Of Fort Caswell, North Carolina

BY JAMES F. MARCHMAN, III
NORTH CAROLINA STATE UNIVERSITY
BAPTIST STUDENT UNION

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Jim Marchman". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping initial "J" and a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.



FORT CASWELL 1865

MASTED FROM TOP OF ENGINEERS

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Fort Caswell, the remains of which you can see as you drive through the North Carolina Baptist Assembly at Southport, North Carolina, has a simple but interesting history. When it was first built, Fort Caswell was one of the best constructed forts in the United States and guarded the entrance to the Cape Fear River and thus to the Port of Wilmington. However, Fort Caswell never played what might be called a "glorious" role in any military conflict. It is even reasonably safe to say that there has never been a life lost at Fort Caswell due to enemy fire even though the fort changed hands four times in the Civil War era.

The original fort, much of which still stands, is the brick structure near the end of the island overlooking the mouth of the Cape Fear River. This part of Fort Caswell was built in the early 1800's while the remainder of the fort, the several long cement structures stretching on down the island, along with many of the barracks and houses, was built around the turn of the last century.

Although Fort Caswell did not play a glamorous role in history it has one of the most interesting histories of any such structure in the area. It is hoped that this short summary of that history will not only help to satisfy the reader's curiosity about the old fort but also inspire an interest in the rich history and tradition of the whole Cape Fear region.

The Cape Fear region has always been an important area with respect to the sea and ocean travel both because of the dangerous cape and because of the well protected harbors at Southport and Wilmington. The region was the scene of important early colonial settlement and as such attracted everyone from international travelers to pirates. Bald Head Island or Smith Island which forms the cape was once one of the main pirate refuges on the colonial coast. As many as twenty pirate ships at a time were anchored at Bald Head and at Smithville (now Southport). This was the headquarters for the notorious pirates Steed Bonnett and Richard Worley. Blackbeard (Edward Teach) was also known to have spent much time here before his death near the North Carolina outer banks.

The British, seeking to protect the area, built several forts in the lower Cape Fear area at various times. One of these was Fort Johnston, built between 1748 and 1764 at Smithville to guard the river entrance from French and Spanish ships. Fort Johnston was known as a very poor fort where "every time a gun was fired part of the parapet fell down."¹

Because of the lack of adequate defenses in this area Congress authorized the construction of a fort on Oak Island in 1825. The work was begun in 1826 under the direction of Major George Blaney of the United States Engineers Corps. Major Blaney, from

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Boston, Mass. was in charge of construction until his death at Smithville in 1836. The work was completed by Captain Alexander J. Swift who was the son of General Joseph Swift, Chief of the Engineer Corps, and who was considered the best engineer in the army at that time.

The total cost of the original construction was \$473,402. The fort was an enclosed pentagonal structure of brick and masonry surrounded by large earth ramparts or walls. Inside the fort was a citadel or defensive barracks which occupied a large part of the parade ground. The fort was officially named Fort Caswell after the first Governor of North Carolina and Revolutionary War leader Richard Caswell by War Department Order No. 32 of April 18, 1833.

Much difficulty was encountered in the construction of the fort due to storms and lack of brick. A heavy storm in August 1835 washed away dikes and undermined some of the brickwork. Even after its initial completion in 1836 upkeep was difficult and \$69,422.09 was spent by Congress from 1836 to 1857 just to keep the fort in a ready condition.

The completed fort was capable of receiving an armament of 64 channel bearing guns with a garrison of about 400 men. It was the only major fort guarding the Cape Fear entrance and was considered one of the strongest forts in the United States at the time.

Late in 1860 the clouds of rebellion were hanging heavy over the South: however, in North Carolina there was heavy Union sentiment. The people of the state preferred for the most part to remain in the Union as long as no action was taken by the Federal Government against those states who preferred secession.

There were however, parts of North Carolina where secessionist fever prevailed. One of these regions was the Cape Fear area. At this time Fort Caswell was in excellent condition but was manned by only a small upkeep force and as yet had no mounted guns or large ammunition supply. However, the people of Wilmington feared that the Federal Government would soon send troops and arms to the fort just as they were doing at the Charleston, South Carolina harbor forts. (South Carolina had already seceded). The United States had not armed the fort for the very reason that it would probably arouse secessionist feeling in the area.

Because of this fear, the citizens of Wilmington organized the "Cape Fear Minute Men" under Major John J. Hedrick. These men were afraid that Fort Caswell would soon be reinforced and would thus effectively seal the Port of Wilmington from shipping in the event of secession. They realized that a reinforced Caswell could not be taken without command of the sea which they did

not have. (Fort Fisher, which was built later at New Inlet, would have been useless if the Federal forces had held Fort Caswell since this would give them free access to the river and the rear of Fort Fisher.)

On December 31, 1860 the "Minute Men" asked Governor John W. Ellis for permission to seize Fort Caswell. The governor refused on the grounds that this would be treason. Again on January 1, 1861 they asked and were refused this permission.

On January 8, 1861 a dispatch was received in Wilmington which confirmed the fears of the "Minute Men". The dispatch said that the United States Revenue Cutter Harriet Lane was on its way to Carolina waters with 50 men and 8 guns. The "Minute Men" assumed that these were reinforcements on their way to Fort Caswell and they decided to take the fort before the ship arrived. On January 10, 1861 the small group, armed with only rifles and shotguns, headed for Smithville where they took control of the United States Barracks there (old Fort Johnston) from the sergeant in charge. They then proceeded across the bay to Fort Caswell where they demanded and obtained the surrender of the fort from the caretaker ordinance sergeant in charge. All of this took place without a shot being fired. The "Minute Men" even signed receipts for all the equipment at the fort. The group, numbering only twenty-five men, was determined to hold the fort armed only with shotguns and two unuseable 24 pound cannons against the United States Army and Navy.

On hearing of the seizure of Fort Caswell, Gov. Ellis, on January 11, 1861, ordered the fort returned to United States authorities. The fort was reluctantly evacuated on January 14, 1861 at nine a.m. and the U. S. Army sergeant again assumed control. All of this took place three months before the firing on Fort Sumpter on April 12, 1861.

After this time the situation in the South became increasingly tense. Lincoln was inaugurated as President of the United States and this served to increase Southern fears. North Carolina however, still preferred to remain in the Union although all of the surrounding states either had already seceded or were in that process and the Confederate States of America was being formed. Many in the state were very vigorous in their denunciation of the "hot-heads" in the states to the south. The people of North Carolina even voted against holding a convention to consider secession. Because of this friendliness, the U. S. Government had not reinforced any of the forts or other installations in the state. Had the "hot-heads" in South Carolina not boiled over and attacked Fort Sumpter at Charleston, North Carolina would probably have remained in the Union and there might never even have been a war. However this was not to be the case.

On April 13, 1861 Fort Sumpter fell to the Southern forces and

the Federal Government mobilized for war. Two days later, on April 15, the United States Secretary of War telegraphed Governor Ellis in Raleigh and asked North Carolina to furnish 75,000 troops to help put down the insurrection. The governor and people of North Carolina were astonished that Lincoln would ask them to attack their friends in South Carolina and almost immediately all Union sentiment seemed to disappear. Before Gov. Ellis even answered the Secretary of War's telegram he ordered Col. Cantwell of the Wilmington Militia to take and hold Fort Caswell immediately. The militia was instructed to act peacefully and only on the defensive since the fort was to be taken only as a precaution against Federal reinforcement.

At 6:20 p.m. April 16, 1861 the Wilmington Militia took possession of Fort Caswell from the sergeant in charge. One of the men at the fort was confined to quarters "in consequence of the discovery of repeated attempts to communicate with his government".⁶⁰ The fort was found in a somewhat dismantled and almost totally defenseless condition.

Two days after the fort was seized a large steamer was sighted headed toward the fort and the militia feared that it was a Federal ship. The troops gathered their arms (only small arms) and prepared to challenge the ship as if they were David taking on Goliath. There was much relief when the ship was recognized as the steamer North Carolina on a regular run to Wilmington from New York.

It was another month before North Carolina seceded from the Union. It is noteworthy that the act of secession and the call to arms was first announced on the parade grounds at Fort Caswell.

At the beginning of the Civil War discipline was said to be very lax at Fort Caswell. Most of the men spent their time fishing all day. However it was not long before the South realized that war was a most serious undertaking. As the blockade of Southern ports began, other forts were built in the area to aid Caswell in guarding the Cape Fear entrance. The best known of these was Fort Fisher at New Inlet (an 18th century storm opened this inlet on the other side of Smith Island. It was closed in the 1870's). There was also an earth fort one mile from Fort Caswell on Oak Island called Fort Campbell and later Fort Holmes, an earth work at Bald Head Lighthouse on Smith Island as well as several forts up the river toward Wilmington.

It was not long before Wilmington became the most important port of the Confederacy. Because of the shoals extending from the cape and the two entrances, the Federal fleet had to cover over fifty miles of sea to block the river entrance. This made it virtually impossible to effectively blockade the port. Both the North and the South soon realized the importance of the forts at Cape Fear. General Robert E. Lee himself warned the defenders

of Forts Caswell and Fisher that if these forts fell he would have to abandon his defenses at Richmond.

On May 11, 1862 the Secretary of the Navy suggested an immediate attack on Fort Caswell with all the forces that could be spared including two ironclads. It was considered impossible to get near the fort without ironclads. One of these ironclads was to have been the famous Monitor. The ships were ordered not to attack without the Monitor which was helping in the attack on Richmond at that time. As soon as Richmond was taken, the Monitor was to go to Cape Fear and to destroy Fort Caswell. This attack was delayed because Richmond did not fall.

In January 1863 the attack was planned even though Richmond had not been taken. Fort Caswell was to be attacked and taken; then Fort Fisher would be attacked from the rear (the fort was open on the river side). The forces would then move up river and take Wilmington. The Confederacy learned of this plan and Fort Caswell, under the command of Lt. Col. Gwathmey, was ordered to fight to the finish.

Plans for the attack progressed until the commander of the ironclad Monitor realized that it was impossible for even his ship to get past the defenses of Fort Caswell. Thus, on January 13, 1863 the Secretary of the Navy ordered the abandonment of the planned attack because of the impossibility of getting ships past Fort Caswell. However, consideration of a land attack against Fort Caswell was recommended. (The U. S. did not know that Fort Campbell protected Fort Caswell on the land side of the fort.)

During the war Fort Caswell rescued numerous blockade runners from the Federal Blockade Fleet. Once blockade runners were within the range of Caswell they knew they were safe since the blockade ships did not dare come within range of its heavy batteries. Sometimes a blockade runner would go aground near the fort and the Federal Fleet would try to get close enough to destroy the ship before the Rebels could take the cargo from the ship or refloat it. During one such episode on February 23, 1863 Fort Caswell fired on the U.S.S. Monticello and the U.S.S. Dacotah killing one man and wounding another. This was the only enemy casualty resulting from Caswell's guns during the war. During another such engagement one of the 32 pound cannon at Fort Caswell exploded killing 4 men. These are the only recorded Southern casualties at the fort during the war.

In May 14, 1863 a United States Navy report stated that "Fort Caswell—presents to us the appearance of impregnability from assaults by ironclads or land batteries."⁽²⁾ It was suggested that the fort might be taken by first taking Smith Island and attacking Fort Caswell from there. Fort Holmes was built on Smith Island to prevent such an attack.

Again in January 1864 the Secretary of the Navy proposed a joint land and sea attack on Fort Caswell. The Secretary of the Army proposed instead that Caswell and Smithville be bypassed by attacking Fort Fisher and going up river from there.

It was during 1864 that torpedoes (underwater mines) were first used in the Cape Fear area. They were used first at Fort Caswell. The mines were placed near the bar and connected by wire to electric batteries at the fort. They were never exploded and attempts to explode them during the evacuation of the fort failed because of dead batteries.

During 1864 a large attack on Forts Caswell and Fisher was still being planned. It was proposed that Fort Caswell be attacked first by exploding a ship loaded with gun powder near the fort and thus blow down part of its walls. Caswell would then be taken and the same plan of attack would be used against Fort Fisher at New Inlet. In a November 18, 1864 letter to the Assistant Secretary of War, U. S. Army Chief Engineer General Richard Delafield gave his views on this plan.⁽³⁾ A ship filled with 560,000 pounds of gunpowder was to be floated as near to Fort Caswell as possible and exploded. General Delafield pointed out that the nearest that the ship could get was 450 yards and to get there it would have to be floated right in front of the fort's batteries. If the fort fired hot shell at the ship it would prematurely blow up the ship and kill anyone aboard. Thus, no one could possibly be asked to volunteer to go with the ship. It was also pointed out that the guns of the fort were quite formidable and commanded by General Whiting who was an expert on hot and hollow shot. Even if the ship could get past the guns the fort was so strong and the ramparts so well sloped that the explosion would have very little, if any, effect.

General Delafield pointed out that the same plan would also fail at Fort Fisher since, although Fisher was not as strong a structure, they could not even get a ship as close to Fisher as they could to Caswell. It is notable that this plan was tried at Fort Fisher despite this advice and it failed to accomplish anything but to wake up all the troops in the fort that night.

The final plan was to take Fort Fisher and block the river there, then to approach Fort Caswell from the rear and take it. Then the Federal forces would move up river to Wilmington and down behind Fort Caswell.

The attack on Fort Fisher began in December 1864. Fort Caswell sent all the troops it could spare to the aid of Fort Fisher.

Fort Fisher held against the heaviest bombardment on any fort in history until January 15, 1865. Land forces poured over its walls and met terrific resistance; however, the fort fell at 9 P.M. that night. It is said that the fort would not have fallen if Confederate General Bragg, who was up the river with a large force,

had come to reinforce the fort. The general, who had a record of incompetence, not only refused to come to the aid of Fort Fisher, but also ordered Fort Caswell evacuated and blown up after Fisher fell. General Whiting later wrote General Robert E. Lee from prison and officially blamed General Bragg for the loss of Fort Fisher and for giving up Fort Caswell without a fight.

At midnight January 15 the orders were received to evacuate Fort Caswell and to regroup up river. The orders were to spike the guns and destroy the ammunition. Large wooden barracks around the fort were burned as well as the wooden citadel inside the fort. The powder and ammunition magazines were then exploded. One of the magazines in Fort Caswell contained nearly 100,000 pounds of powder and it exploded with such power that the shock was felt in Wilmington and even 100 miles away in Fayetteville.

Finally on January 16 the Confederate flag was hauled down and the last men left the fort which had successfully guarded the main entrance to the river for four long years of civil war.

When the Federal forces took possession of the fort again they found that the southeast wall had been blown out and part of the north and west front walls had been destroyed by the Confederate troops.

Fort Caswell remained in ruins for many years after the War Between the States. It was not until the latter part of the 19th century when the United States began to be more involved in world affairs and struggles that the fort was heard of again. By Act of Congress on April 14, 1896 money was appropriated to reconstruct Fort Caswell. New Inlet had been closed for about 20 years at this time and Caswell guarded the only entrance to the river and the Port of Wilmington.

The new fort consisted of the seven batteries which remain in a deteriorated form today. These were Caswell Battery, which was built over the remains of the original fort and again named in honor of Gov. Richard Caswell; Swift Battery, which stands in front of the old barracks and was named for Alexander J. Swift, the engineer who completed the original fort; Madison Battery, which is now the Drift Inn; Bagley Battery, the large Battery just west of the barracks; Shipp Battery, the last structure near the gate; and McDonough and McKavett Batteries, which are next to the original fort at the north-east end of Oak Island.

The new fort became the station of the United States Coast Artillery in the Cape Fear region. In 1909 the U. S. Coast Artillery Band from Fort Caswell was the official band playing for President William Howard Taft during his visit to the Cape Fear region.

In 1916 Fort Caswell was again one of the most important mili-

tary posts on the east coast. It was the headquarters of the Cape Fear Coastal Defenses and was manned by three companies of Coast Artillery Corps under the command of Col. Charles A. Bennett. The armament consisted of mortars, direct and rapid fire guns and a mine defense. The fort was used as an Army training camp in World War I.

After the Great War the world was thought to be at peace for good and in 1923 Fort Caswell was abandoned by the Coast Artillery. One reason for its abandonment was its isolation. Until 1928 there was no road to Oak Island. The only means of approach was by water. In 1935 the State of North Carolina proposed that Caswell be transformed into a seaplane base. Since most of the buildings (most of which still are used) were still in good condition, it could be converted without much expense. However, the Pentagon did not comply with this suggestion and the fort remained unoccupied.

Hence, Caswell remained desolate until World War II. Just three days after the "Day of Infamy" of December 7, 1941 the United States again acquired the property on Oak Island by means of condemnation.

During World War II Fort Caswell served as an army base and a submarine lookout post. Thus, once more the fort helped protect the North Carolina coast and the Port of Wilmington during a military crisis. On January 31, 1946 Fort Caswell was designated as war surplus and assigned for disposal.

The Baptist State Convention of North Carolina purchased the fort property for \$86,000 on September 27, 1949. On October 5 of that year the deed was registered and the 250 acres on Oak Island belonged to the Baptists of North Carolina.

Since that time Fort Caswell has been a religious assembly ground. Many of the buildings of Caswell's second era (World War I and the Spanish-American War) are still in use and many additional structures have been built. Unfortunately many of the buildings have been allowed to deteriorate or have been damaged by careless use and reconstruction.

Old Fort Caswell now provides a place of relaxation and learning for Baptists and all others in the center of the most interesting and varied area of the United States. All around lie historic relics of other eras rich in the tradition of the Cape Fear, and the unsurpassed beauty of unscarred nature. Visitors to the area can see everything from the ruins of one of the earliest towns in Colonial America to the wild natural beauty of Bald Head Island.

Hence today, peaceful yet powerful old Fort Caswell is a refuge for those who seek the power and peace of the Christian message in North Carolina's most beautiful and historic environment.



SWIFT BATTERY



INSIDE ORIGINAL FORT

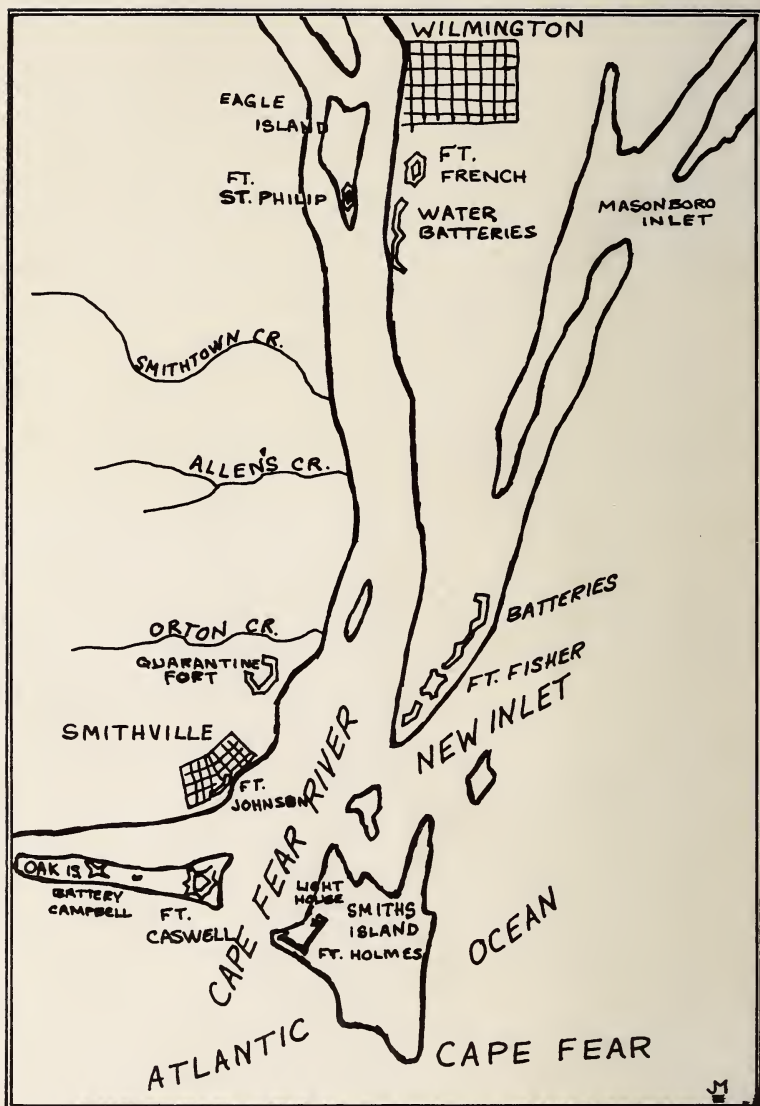
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LOWER CAPE FEAR—1864-65

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